

N.I.B. BULLETINS

No. 7

**A HISTORY
OF
BLIND WELFARE
IN
ENGLAND AND WALES**

Price 6d.

Published by the
NATIONAL INSTITUTE FOR THE BLIND
Registered under the Blind Persons Act, 1920)
224-6-8 Great Portland Street, London, W.1

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A History of Blind Welfare in England and Wales

FROM time to time, the National Institute for the Blind has been approached by speakers, preachers, and social workers, with the request for a brief outline of the history of blind welfare. They are not as a rule prepared to spend money on the purchase of text-books that they may only need once, Public Libraries can rarely help them, and a study of the texts of Acts of Parliament, without some knowledge of their background and the circumstances which called them forth, is rather an arid affair. This Bulletin has, therefore, been prepared to meet the needs of such enquirers.

The history of blind welfare is one that does not go back very far, for the first institution for the blind in England was founded less than a century and a half ago. Before that date, no attempt seems to have been made to educate the blind as a class, though there were a few brilliant blind people, here and on the Continent, who resolutely refused to be daunted by their handicap, and won fame as scholars in the face of extraordinary difficulties. Among these were Nicholas Saunderson, the successor of Newton as Lucasian professor of mathematics at Cambridge in the early eighteenth century ; Thomas Blacklock, a Scottish versifier and the friend both of Robert Burns and Sir Walter Scott ; Mademoiselle de Salignac, who, in the eighteenth century " understood the elements of geography, algebra, and astronomy," and described geometry as " a proper science for the blind " ; and

Maria von Paradis, the gifted pianist, who, on temporarily recovering her sight after treatment by Mesmer (of mesmerism fame), observed genially that she "thought a dog more agreeable looking than a man."

They are a gallant little company, but they stand out from the surrounding darkness and make it seem all the more obscure. For the rank and file of blind persons, there was nothing available save dependence upon a not very enlightened Poor Law or upon the alms of the charitable, and no means of education.

Early Pension Societies.

The first stirrings of sympathy towards the blind seem to have been in the direction of giving them financial help, and many charities date from the eighteenth and the early nineteenth centuries. Thus in 1718 we read of West's Gift, in 1774 of Hetherington's Charity, in 1796 of Came's Gift, in 1819 of the Institution for the Relief of the Indigent Blind of the Jewish Persuasion, and so on.

Some of the regulations governing these charities make quaint reading. Of Hetherington's Charity we are told that—"Persons of the following descriptions are deemed ineligible: Day-labourers of every denomination, common soldiers and sailors, militia-men (unless principals serving for themselves), domestic and menial servants of gentlemen, journeymen in any handicraft trade, persons living by turning a mangle, a polisher's wheel, or other like employment." Granger's Charity required that the applicant should produce a "certificate of good fame for honesty and sobriety" from the minister and churchwardens of the parish.

The idea that the blind could be trained and educated to play their part in society was very slow in gaining acceptance, and it is significant that the early institutions were often termed "Asylums"; for they were regarded rather as places of refuge than as training grounds for life.

Early Institutions.

The first outstanding name in the English history of blind welfare is that of Edward Rushton, whose sympathy was quickened by the fact that he had himself suffered loss of sight in a courageous effort to lessen the sufferings of negroes, smitten with malignant ophthalmia on board a slave-ship. Rushton had to give up sea-faring life on account of his blindness, and thenceforward elected to devote himself to a project for the education of the blind, which resulted in the opening of the Liverpool School for the Indigent Blind in 1791.

Other institutions followed fairly soon, the Edinburgh Asylum and that at Bristol being opened in 1793, and the School for the Indigent Blind at Southwark in 1799. In the early eighteen hundreds, institutions were founded in Norwich, Aberdeen and Glasgow, and before 1850 there were also schools at York, in London (The London Society for Teaching the Blind to Read), and at Newcastle, Exeter, Manchester, Nottingham and Birmingham.

It is easy to smile at the instruction given in these early institutions, and at the regulations to be found in the pages of their old Reports: "The hours of working shall be from seven in the morning till seven in the evening, an hour being allowed for breakfast and another for dinner. Hours for recreation shall also be allowed occasionally, according to the age and health of the scholars." The naive piety and the rather self-conscious benevolence that marks them are no longer fashionable to-day, but they were characteristic of the time.

While religious teaching occupied the first place in the time-tables of these early institutions, elementary teaching of arithmetic, geography, history, or what the Birmingham Institution austere described as "plain English," also had their place in the curriculum, and manual training was given in basket-making, mat-making, mattress-making, and knitting. The poem

of one blind French enthusiast, who wrote of the new world opened out to him through education in a Paris school, was thus translated:—

“ Though Nature from our darkened eyes
For ever veils her charms sublime,
The form of earth and even of skies
By Fancy’s aid we figuring climb.
We trace the rivers to their source,
Of stars we calculate the course—
From Europe to th’ Atlantic shore
Successive journeys we pursue,
Thanks to the hand whose prudence due
Guides us in Geographic lore.”

Boys were given “religious instruction and elementary education, with such branches of trade as may be suited to their capacity and needs,” while their sisters were not neglected, but “instructed in various branches of female industry, the principles of religion, and the elements of general knowledge.”

The Problem of the Trained Worker.

While it is probable that at first the Institutions for the blind were looked upon as providing a permanent shelter for their inmates, it must very soon have been apparent to those responsible for them that they were only touching the fringe of the problem by giving to a few of the more fortunate blind a roof over their heads. It was essential that the majority of the trained pupils should pass out, if constructive work was to be done, and room found for those awaiting admission.

At the same time, to turn the trained pupil adrift without making any plan for him which should ensure his after-care, was almost tantamount to inviting him to earn his living by his wits as a street-beggar, or condemning him to a workhouse existence. Technical training must be followed by employment, either in workshops or in the homes of the blind, if it was to be justified.

As early as 1853, a blind woman, Elizabeth Gilbert, who, as daughter of the Bishop of Chichester, was a person of some social standing and influence, determined to grapple with the problem by setting blind men to work in their homes. She placed an energetic and able blind man in charge of the venture, and six men were engaged. For the first two years she bore the expenses of the experiment, and in 1856 a Society was founded to carry on the work. This Society still exists as the Incorporated Association for Promoting the General Welfare of the Blind.

Miss Gilbert's venture was rather more on the lines of a home workers' scheme than a workshop, at any rate in its inception, but her example of finding employment for the blind was followed in many parts of the country, so that between 1854 and 1869 sixteen workshops were established, employing in all about 450 blind persons. When we remember that there are to-day more than 16,500 blind persons between the ages of 16 and 50, it is obvious that such provision was only a drop in the ocean, but at least it was a brave beginning.

Home Teaching Societies.

The middle of the nineteenth century thus shows us that an attempt was being made to meet the needs of the younger blind in residential schools, that a movement to establish workshops for adults in addition to the older institutions had begun, and that a considerable amount of money was devoted annually by the various pensions societies to meet the financial needs of the elderly and indigent.

But this was not all, for in addition to the regular financial help afforded by pensions, a certain amount of help of a less tangible kind was secured to the blind living in their own homes, by the establishment in the fifties and sixties of many Home Teaching Societies. Visitors from these Societies, generally themselves

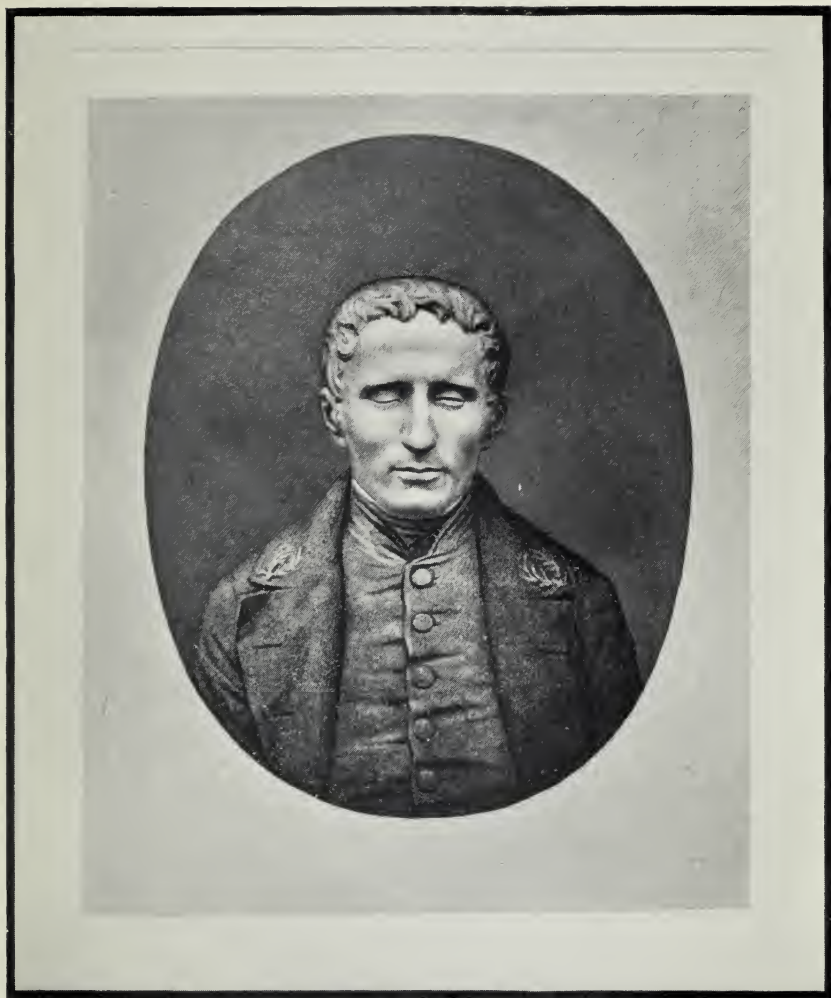
blind, were employed to call regularly at the homes of the blind, to teach those who wished to learn to read embossed type, and, when they had learned, to lend them books, generally of a religious nature.

The pioneer Society to undertake the work was the Indigent Blind Visiting Society, founded as early as 1834 by Lord Shaftesbury and Lord Ebury. Its objects were thus set forth : " To assist and ameliorate the condition of the aged and destitute blind poor in London and its vicinity, by providing them with daily readers of the Scriptures at their habitations, with conductors to Church, with temporal relief in necessitous cases."

Somewhat similar societies were founded in Carlisle (1856), Bristol (1857) and Birmingham (1858), until, in *A Guide to the Institutions and Charities for the Blind*, published in 1884, it is stated that 79 Home Teaching Societies were at work.

At the outset, they were in the main concerned more with the spiritual than the temporal needs of the blind. " The blind are in our midst, for the most part neglected . . . yet immortal beings," says the Carlisle Report for 1864. But it was naturally not long before the workers for such societies realised that by reading the Bible aloud to those deprived of the barest necessities of life they did not fulfil the whole of Christian duty towards them, and the material welfare of the blind came to have a place in the schemes of the societies.

It is due to this broadening of the scope of their work that these Home Teaching Societies are of more than merely antiquarian interest to the student of blind welfare, for from them sprang the voluntary agencies for the blind, upon which, with the passing of the Blind Persons Act in 1920, so much responsibility was eventually to be laid.



LOUIS BRAILLE

(1809—1852)

Early Forms of Embossed Literature.

It is impossible to attempt even a sketch of the history of blind welfare without entering in some detail into the question of embossed literature, for only when some method of reading had been evolved for the blind could education in any serious sense be attempted.

To-day Braille holds the field unquestioned in every school for the blind, and when we learn that Louis Braille perfected his system as early as 1834, we are tempted to imagine that the early schools for the blind found his system as a medium ready to their hand. Actually, however, about fifty years elapsed between the invention of Braille and its general adoption in the schools of this country.

In 1833, the Edinburgh Society of Arts offered a prize for the best type invented for the blind, and the prize was awarded to a Dr. Fry, who submitted a plain Roman capital letter, which could be read by both seeing and sightless. Fry's type strongly attracted John Alston, one of the officials of the Glasgow Asylum for the Blind, who made a special appeal for a printing press, and in 1840 printed the whole of the Bible in a very slightly modified form of the type. It is interesting to read that the work "was accelerated by a grant of £400 by the Lords of Her Majesty's Treasury."

Another of the competitors in the Edinburgh competition was James Gall, who submitted another type that was legible to the eye, and was based on the Roman capital in angular form.

In 1830, one Thomas Lucas opened a small school for blind children in Bristol, and he too, was responsible for the invention of a raised type. He departed, however, from the principles of Fry and Alston, who had held that the blind, the majority of whom lived in their own homes, and were dependent on their relatives to teach them, should use a type that was

legible to the seeing. Lucas type was stenographic, and his alphabet was "composed of thirteen simple characters, and thirteen formed from the roots of these, with a crochet head to each." He was a great believer in saving space, and one sign might do duty for a number of words, so that the reader was largely dependent on context to discover the meaning in any particular sentence.

Lucas was already over seventy when he formulated his system, and the strain of his work seems to have been too much for him: "The nervous excitement caused by incessant conflict with advocates of other methods of reading by touch, together with the change from private life to a public career, so acted on his constitution, that he passed away from this world without having realised his expectation of seeing the Scriptures, and a library of general utility, printed on his system."

However, in spite of his death in 1837, his work went on, as the London Society for Teaching the Blind to Read was founded in 1838, with the printing of Lucas type as part of its programme. In 1871, Lucas type was still in use in seven institutions for the Blind, whereas Braille was at that time used only in four, and it was not until as late as 1891 that the London Society discontinued the production of Lucas.

Another stenographic system was invented by Hartley Frere. "We possess specimens of all the books that have been printed for the blind," wrote a severe and anonymous critic of Frere's type in *The Polytechnic Journal*, "but those we have seen of Frere's, are, we are sorry to say, positively discreditable." In spite of this criticism, however, the type had its supporters, and Frere was the inventor of the return guide-line later made use of by Dr. Moon.

In 1847, the first book was printed in Moon type, the invention of William Moon, and worthy of description as the only embossed type that has survived to the present day to stand side by side with Braille.

It is based, like so many types of the time, on the Roman capital, some of the letters being adopted as they stand, some being slightly modified in form, others again so simplified as to be hardly recognisable as related to the original letters, and a very few being arbitrary symbols. To-day Moon type is used almost exclusively by the home teacher whose work it is to instruct the adult and elderly blind ; and for the less literate, or for those whose fingers have become insensitive, it meets a very real need most admirably.

Braille Type Introduced in England.

So much for the diversity of types, which for so many years held the field, or rather, by holding little bits of the field, hindered the progress of education.

We turn now to Braille, an arbitrary system of embossed dots, invented in 1829, and perfected a few years later, by Louis Braille, a blind teacher and organist at the first school ever founded for the blind, the Institution des Jeunes Aveugles in Paris. Braille owed a good deal to the earlier invention of a French soldier, Charles Barbier, but the system as Barbier left it was cumbrous and over-elaborate, and it was the genius of Louis Braille that transformed it into the greatest instrument for the emancipation of the blind that the world has known, opening realms of learning and music to men and women hitherto condemned to illiteracy.

The genius of Louis Braille was not, however, to have its effect on the blind on this side of the Channel for a long time (even in his own country this prophet was without honour for twenty years), and it was not until 1868, when Dr. Armitage founded the British and Foreign Blind Association, with its committee of finger-readers to report on the various systems, that the initial step was taken, and Braille type began, at first very slowly, but with ever-increasing momentum, to come into its own.

The committee was made up of men who had experience of teaching both the young and the adult blind, and in order that they might arrive at a fair judgment, they took evidence from many blind men who came before them, and were tested by reading aloud. On previous occasions when the merits of different systems had been discussed, it had been at conferences, where the various institutions had been represented by their secretaries or managers, who were apt to be over-zealous partisans of the particular type favoured by their own organisation.

The committee reported in favour of Braille, and stressed the advantage it had over its rivals in being easy to write as well as to read, and the importance of the fact that the ordinary Braille alphabet could also provide a satisfactory form of musical notation.

Henceforward Dr. Armitage devoted himself to the task of bringing home to schools and institutions throughout the country the advantage of Braille over other systems, and the British and Foreign Blind Association became a centre for the supply of books, maps, music, and Braille writing-frames.

Little by little the system made its way. In 1874 the Midland Institution at Nottingham introduced it into its school, in 1881 it was first employed at Henshaw's Blind Asylum, Manchester, and by 1883 we read that twenty-seven schools were using Braille, though thirty-five still used Moon type.

The Beginnings of Compulsory Education.

In 1870, an Education Act was passed, which enforced the elementary education of seeing children between the ages of 5 and 14. An attempt was made, largely at the instance of Miss Gilbert, to secure the inclusion of blind children within the Act, but it was not successful, for although the blind child was not specifically excluded, no provision was made for him. He might, if his parents wished it, attend the ordinary day-school of his locality, but as the lessons there were

designed to meet the needs of the seeing, and the classes were often large, they would for the most part slip unheeded over his head. In such circumstances, the authorities were unlikely to enforce his attendance.

In 1874, the Charity Organisation Society appointed a committee to enquire what could be done to promote the welfare of the blind, and the recommendation of this committee, that a Government enquiry should be set on foot, resulted, in 1885, in the appointment of a Royal Commission.

The Royal Commission presented its report in 1889, and recommended that the provisions of the Education Act of 1870 be extended to the blind, and that compulsory education of blind children at school should be enforced up to the age of 16. Reference to other recommendations of the report, which is an interesting and enlightened document, well worth studying even to-day, will be made later in this pamphlet; here we are concerned with its effect upon education.

The principal result of the report was the passing of the Elementary Education (Blind and Deaf Children) Act in 1893, which brought the benefits of education within the reach of all the young blind, and so opened up a new era. It made education compulsory between the ages of 5 and 16, refused to admit that attendance at school might be excused on the ground of the distance of a school for the blind from a child's home, and introduced Government inspection of certified schools for the blind. Hitherto, although by now Braille was the recognised medium of instruction, the number of children who learnt it had been limited, and the fact that the competition of rival types had ended in a victory for Braille could only have a very partial influence, so long as education was not compulsory. Henceforward, however, now that education had been recognised as the right of the blind child, and Braille accepted as the instrument of that education, there was reasonable prospect of advance.

It is generally held by educationists that the fact of blindness must so retard a pupil that the average blind child is two years behind the seeing, and he is therefore at the same stage educationally at 16 as the seeing child is at 14. As, owing to his handicap, trade-training is essential for him if he is to be fitted to become a wage earner, the Education Act of 1893, valuable as it was, did not, merely by extending the blind child's education to 16, provide a complete solution to his problems.

It is not surprising, therefore, that at a conference of educationists held in 1894, it was recommended that the education of the blind should be continued up to the age of 18 years, even if it meant postponing the compulsory age of admission to school from 5 to 7 years. It was argued at this conference that those responsible for the report of the Royal Commission had definitely recommended that "from 16 to 21 the school authority should have the power and duty of giving the necessitous blind a liberal grant to maintain themselves while they are learning a trade."

No official action was taken, however, so far as the training of those over 16 was concerned, although private benevolence, free places given by the institutions for the blind, and help from enlightened Boards of Guardians, made it possible in many cases for the promising blind boy or girl to receive industrial training.

The Saxon System.

The Royal Commission of 1889 had been alive to the fact that education and training, important as they were, could only lead to a dead end, unless they could be followed by employment. The residential institutions and the newly-established workshops were a step in the direction of solving the problem, but only a step, for workshop accommodation could only be found for a fraction of the able-bodied blind, and many of those who were trained naturally desired to return to their homes when the period of training came to

an end. "A leading defect in the present condition of the blind," says the report of the Royal Commission, "is that, with a few exceptions, no care or supervision is exercised over the past pupils who have been trained in the institutions, and consequently many fail to earn their living or maintain themselves by honest labour after they leave school." And again: "Even those who have been well trained and learnt a trade, such as basket-making, brush-making, etc., find great difficulty in carrying it on at their own homes, or in selling the work when it is made."

Dr. Armitage, who was keenly alive to all the difficulties, wrote as follows: "It is tolerably certain that, speaking generally, but few of the pupils who have learnt trades at our schools ever practice them after leaving . . . Some years ago, I was speaking on this subject with a high official in one of our blind schools, and he informed me that the pupils, when they left, hardly ever succeeded; that they had to be supported by their friends, or, what he considered still better, they went to the workhouse." It was a melancholy conclusion.

Fortunately for the blind of England, Dr. Armitage was a great traveller, and he seems to have visited European countries, notebook in hand, ever eager to learn, and to make use of his journeyings to bring back with him new ideas for blind welfare. His interest was specially roused when on a visit to Germany in 1883 he was able to investigate a scheme of after-care for the former pupils of the Institution for the Blind in Dresden. It was a scheme by which the trained worker, accomplished as basket-maker, brush-maker, or piano-tuner, could return to his own home in town or village, and there carry on his trade under a supervisor living in the neighbourhood—"a respectable benevolent, practical man, capable of producing custom for his wards." Raw materials were purchased from the Dresden Institution, and an initial outfit of tools and materials was given. Occasional help in the form of

a grant to supplement earnings might also be forthcoming, and, where the blind man could not unaided find private custom for his finished goods, the Institute stepped in, and purchased them.

Dr. Armitage was not successful in securing the adoption of the Saxon system more than very partially in England, in spite of the very definite recommendation of the Royal Commission ("We think," ran a sentence in the report, "that the adoption of the Saxon system is of the utmost importance to the blind of this country"), but it is of interest to the student of blind welfare, as the forerunner of the Home Workers' scheme, made possible many years later through State aid.

The Royal Normal College.

It is perhaps fitting, at this juncture, to give some account of another of the projects specially associated with the name of Dr. Armitage, and here, once more, he was influenced by his foreign researches in the interests of the blind. Dr. Armitage had been much impressed by the successes achieved by the Institution Nationale des Jeunes Aveugles in Paris, where all the pupils learned music, and received training as organists, teachers of pianoforte and organ, and piano-tuners. About 30 per cent. of those trained were able to support themselves fully after leaving, and about 30 per cent. more able to maintain themselves partially. In England, on the other hand, only a very minute proportion of those taught music were thus successful in their after-careers.

Dr. Armitage realised that this English failure must be due to poor teaching, and began to consider how an improvement could be effected. By a happy accident, just when the matter was uppermost in his mind, he was visited in 1871 by a blind teacher of music from Perkins Institution for the Blind, Massachusetts, "and," writes Dr. Armitage, "within half an hour of his coming we were planning how to

establish a school which should do for the blind of the United Kingdom as much, or even more than the Paris Institution had done for those of France."

The blind visitor was Francis Campbell, who became the first Principal of the Royal Normal College for the Blind, and brought to his task enthusiasm, long practical experience, and a zeal for physical, no less than mental fitness, which made the Royal Normal College a pioneer in the physical training of the blind, as well as a place of sound musical education. The swimming bath, the gymnasium, and the acres of ground upon which the College stood, were no less important as factors in its success than the fact that it was situated near the Crystal Palace, where the pupils had opportunities of hearing some of the best musicians of the day. It all cost money, but the Royal Normal College was fortunate in 1881 in securing the special interest of the trustees of a fund bequeathed by a wealthy Londoner, Henry Gardner, who had left a fortune largely for educational purposes in the interests of the blind. It was agreed by the trustees to set aside a considerable part of the funds in helping children to obtain an education at the Royal Normal College.

Worcester College.

The Royal Normal College was not, however, the first body to offer something more than elementary education to the blind. In 1866 a "College for the Blind Sons of Gentlemen" was founded at Worcester to give education on public school lines to those who were blind, and whose parents were in a position to afford public school education for them. In 1889 a Trust Deed was drawn up on the lines of those of other public schools, and a Board of Governors appointed. This Trust Deed was replaced in 1936 by one which left the objects and purposes of the College unchanged, but placed the ultimate responsibility for the College in the hands of the National Institute for the Blind, through a representative Board of Governors.

Trade Training.

In 1902 an important step forward was taken in the direction of trade-training. As we have seen, the recommendations of the 1889 Commission with regard to training were not followed by any official action, and all that was done in this regard was the work of private philanthropy, Boards of Guardians, or the governing bodies of blind institutions.

However, in 1902 an Education Act was passed, which stated that the Local Education Authority "might take such steps as seem to them desirable . . . to supply, or aid the supply of education other than elementary." The Act did not specifically mention the blind, and at first it seemed doubtful whether this clause in it, passed in the interests of the seeing, could be used to cover the technical training of the blind over 16.

In a copy of *The Blind* for October, 1903, it is stated that "a very important correspondence" had taken place between Mr. Stainsby, the Superintendent of the Birmingham Institution for the Blind, and the Board of Education, and that the Board had suggested that proposals of Local Education Authorities to aid the higher education of blind children under the Act should be submitted. A few months later, *The Blind* published an imposing list of Local Education Authorities which had taken the hint, and had been rewarded; before very long, it was generally accepted that the phrase "other than elementary" covered the technical training of the blind.

An Effort Towards Co-ordination.

An account has been given earlier in this pamphlet of the existence in various parts of the country of societies, generally known at the outset as Home Teaching Societies, which did valuable work of a rather miscellaneous kind.

They began, as we have seen, by visiting and teaching the blind in particular areas, and naturally, as a result of this visiting, the needs of the blind became better known, and some attempt was made to meet them. A register was kept (rather a rough and ready affair, perhaps, judged by modern and more exacting standards), an effort was made to arrange for the education and training of the young blind before such education had become compulsory, or training at all general, some help was given in the direction of employment of those who had been trained, and the sick and elderly were cared for in their homes.

Voluntary agencies for the blind, devoting themselves to work on these lines, had, by the end of the nineteenth century, so increased in number that they were to be found in practically every large town throughout England and Wales.

Much very valuable work was done, but it was done for the most part in watertight compartments, so that the worker from the north had little or no contact with the worker from the south, save for an occasional interchange of ideas at a conference. A speaker at such a conference in 1898 complained that there was "among those who work for the blind a feeling that they are not enough in touch with one another, and that consequently they are not individually cognisant of much that is being done . . . beyond the limited horizon of the charity in which they are themselves personally interested."

In 1906, at a conference held in Manchester, it was agreed to form a North of England Union of all Societies and Institutions for the Blind in the six northern counties of England, with the object of leading to "the organisation, unification, and extension of work on behalf of the outdoor blind."

The example thus set was followed in other parts of the country, until, in 1911, there were seven Unions covering the whole of England and Wales. These were united by a further organisation, at first termed the

Union of Unions, and later, the Union of Counties Associations for the Blind. The objects of this unifying body were to promote co-operation among the Counties Associations, and among all institutions, societies, and agencies working for the blind throughout England and Wales, and to further a common policy in all work concerning the blind.

The Blind and the State.

More and more, however, it was becoming evident, in the later years of the nineteenth, and earlier years of the twentieth century, that organisations for the blind, whether they aimed at the training and employment of the blind, the establishment of homes and hostels, the visiting and teaching of the blind in their own homes, or the provision of reading material in embossed type, were hampered at every turn by lack of adequate funds, as the demands upon their resources grew. It came to be recognised by workers for the blind, and perhaps even more markedly by the blind themselves, that private philanthropy could not meet the growing demands upon it, and that the time had come for the State to take fuller responsibility, and to do something to mitigate the handicap of blindness.

In March, 1914, a debate took place in the House of Commons, which resulted in the appointment of a Departmental Committee "to consider the present condition of the blind." The Committee sat for three years, interrogated a large number of witnesses, and in 1917 presented its report.

The chief recommendation of the report was that a department in the Local Government Board (shortly to be succeeded by the Ministry of Health) should be set up as the central authority for the care of the blind, to be assisted by an Advisory Committee "of persons associated with the cause of the blind," and it was further urged that this central authority "should have at its disposal funds provided by the Exchequer, in order to make grants."

Grants to Approved Agencies.

The newly appointed Advisory Committee soon got to work, and one of its first steps was to propose that grants should be made to approved agencies for the blind, in return for certain services performed by them. These grants and services were as follows :—

Workshops	...	...	£20 per head p.a.
Home Workers	...	...	£20 per head p.a.
Homes	...	...	£13 per head p.a.
Hostels	...	...	£5 per head p.a.
Home Teaching	...	...	£78 p.a. per Home Teacher.
Book Production	...	...	2s. 6d. per volume, and 2d. per sheet of magazines or music.
Counties Associations	...	...	£20 p.a. per 100 registered blind persons.

These grants were significant in that they expressed a readiness on the part of the State to assist the blind through existing organisations. They were of value not only to the worker in the sheltered workshop, but made it possible for the blind man living at a distance from such a workshop to be employed in his own home, on the lines of the scheme advocated so long before by Dr. Armitage in his commendation of the Saxon system. The home teaching service, which had proved of great comfort to the lonely and isolated blind man or woman in old age, could now be extended very widely, and by its means a link was to be forged between the Society for the Blind and the blind person, so that the lonely had a personal friend upon whom to rely, rather than an impersonal society. The Counties Associations for the Blind, which had in the past been sorely hampered by lack of funds, could now rely upon a regular income.

Five Important Organisations.

Before we pass on to the year 1920, which stands out in the annals of the blind as that in which the Blind Persons Act became law, there are five organisations for the blind which may be dealt with, as occupying

a rather special place in the general scheme of blind welfare, and as carrying out special functions. They are :—

The National Institute for the Blind.

The National Library for the Blind.

The College of Teachers of the Blind.

The Association of Workshops for the Blind.

St. Dunstan's Organisation for Blinded Soldiers, Sailors and Airmen.

The Association of Workshops for the Blind did not come into being until after 1920, but it is convenient to deal with it here, though at the expense of chronology.

The National Institute for the Blind.

In the earlier pages of this pamphlet, mention has been made of the British and Foreign Blind Association, founded in 1868 by Dr. Armitage for the special purpose of furthering the use of Braille, by the provision of embossed literature and apparatus. The Association soon became the centre for the supply of books, maps, music, Braille writing-frames, and other educational appliances, and in 1881 it also began the publication of periodicals in Braille type.

Although the Association was founded in the first instance to further the production of Braille, by degrees it widened its activities very considerably, especially after 1914, when Sir Arthur Pearson was elected its first President. In that year, the title British and Foreign Blind Association was replaced by that of the National Institute for the Blind, and the Society moved into new premises, which were opened by the King and Queen.

Among the principal activities of the National Institute already in existence in 1920, in addition to its production of books, magazines, music and apparatus, the following may be noted :—

- (1) A residential nursery school for blind babies (known as a Sunshine Home) at Chorleywood.

A few years later two similar Sunshine Homes were opened by the Institute at Southport and at Leamington.

(2) A school of massage, where blind students were trained for the examinations of the Chartered Society of Massage and Medical Gymnastics.

(3) A guest-house for the elderly blind, a home for women, and a hostel for blind workers.

(4) A home teaching branch.

(5) An after-care department, which gave relief to the necessitous, and assistance to those undergoing training in industrial and approved occupations.

Since 1920 there have been a number of additions to the work of the National Institute, notably the establishment of a residential secondary school for blind girls, Chorleywood College, where they can be prepared for the University ; the acceptance of responsibility for Worcester College for the Blind ; the establishment of a residential school for educable mentally retarded children of both sexes at Court Grange, Abbotskerswell ; the provision of a school journey centre and holiday home for blind boys and girls at New Romney ; the maintenance of a Home Industries Department for the employment of blind home workers in the southern home counties ; and a considerable development of educational, industrial and technical research. The Alfred Eichholz Clinic of Massage and Physiotherapy by the Blind was opened in 1931, and in 1935 a new service of great potential importance was initiated when the Institute, assisted by St. Dunstan's, commenced the manufacture and distribution of Talking Books for the blind.

On the other hand, the Institute, which before 1920 carried on the service of home teaching of the blind in London and the home counties, has since that date transferred all this work to local agencies. A similar policy of decentralisation, and co-operation with local agencies, has been followed in much of the relief work

formerly performed. The policy of the National Institute in general since 1920 has been to provide any required services which can be carried on most effectively or most economically on a national scale, and to fill any gaps in the system of blind welfare.

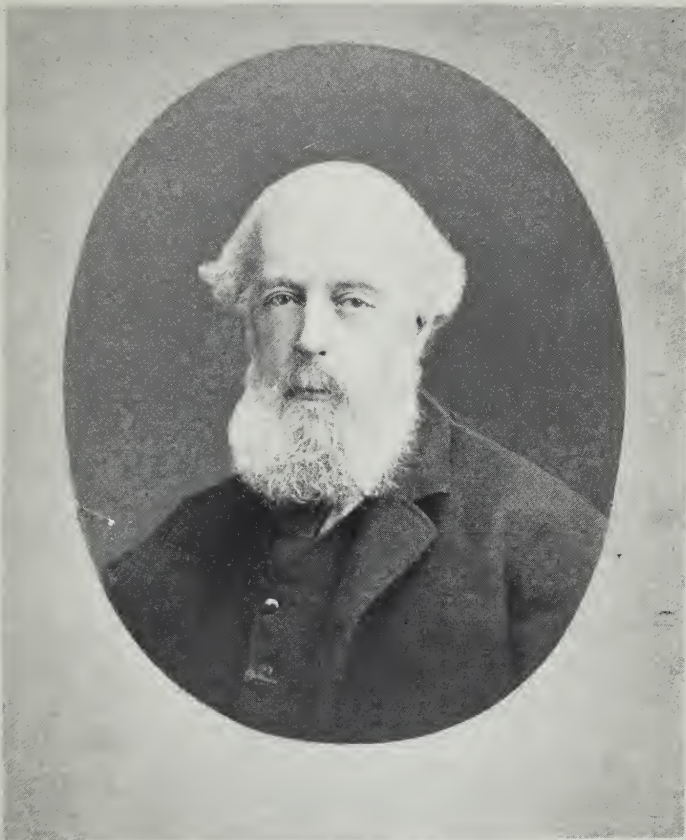
The National Library for the Blind.

The National Library for the Blind was founded in 1882 by a blind woman and her friend in modest headquarters at Hampstead. To-day it is housed in fine buildings in Westminster, has a branch in Manchester, employs about 115 blind copyists, and has over 600 voluntary writers, while the circulation record for 1937-38 was 345,868 volumes. Books are lent to blind readers free of cost, and the Library benefits by the fact that postage of Braille books is, owing to a Post Office concession dating from 1908, extremely low. It is to Miss Austen, the Librarian from 1906 until her death in 1918, that the National Library owes more than to any other individual worker, for in a dozen years she vastly developed its usefulness, and spent herself in selfless devotion in the interests of blind readers, and the pursuit of her ideal: "One large central library . . . where every kind of book would be within the reach of every blind person in Great Britain and Ireland."

The College of Teachers of the Blind.

The College of Teachers of the Blind was founded in 1907 "to promote the education of the blind, to encourage the training of teachers of the blind and to raise their status, to hold examinations and grant diplomas, to foster comradeship, and to facilitate united action in matters affecting their professional welfare."

It has done much to improve the standard of teaching in schools for the blind, and now holds examinations for school teachers, home teachers, craft



THOMAS RHODES ARMITAGE, M.D.

(1824—1890)

instructors, and blind pianoforte tuners, which ensure that the teaching of the blind, whether in school, home, or workshop, reaches a definite professional level. By means of its ink-print magazine "The Teacher of the Blind," and meetings at which educational and professional problems are discussed, the College is able to keep in touch with its members.

The Association of Workshops for the Blind.

This Association, formed in 1929, exists to unite those responsible for the conduct of workshops in much the same way as the College of Teachers of the Blind unites those engaged in educational work. It seeks to foster co-operation among workshops, to promote research in problems connected with the employment of the blind, to facilitate united action, and to raise the standard of efficiency in workshops by the interchange of information and the encouragement of new methods and ideas.

St. Dunstan's Organisation for Blinded Soldiers, Sailors and Airmen.

St. Dunstan's Hostel for Blinded Soldiers and Sailors was founded in 1915 by the National Institute for the Blind, under the personal direction of Sir Arthur Pearson, to meet the needs of those who had lost their sight in the War. Its growth, from an organisation which cared for 16 soldiers in 1915 to one that in 1938 had nearly 2,000 men on its books, and its extraordinary success in raising money for the training, establishment, and general welfare of the war-blinded, was due in the first instance to the amazing energy and driving force of its brilliant founder, and later to those who succeeded him in the work, when his career was cut short by his tragically sudden death in 1921. In 1922 St. Dunstan's separated from the National Institute for the Blind, and thereafter carried on its work independently.

The Blind Persons Act, 1920.

From this digression, to describe some of the organisations for the blind which must not be overlooked in a general survey of the blind world, we pass on to 1920, and the Blind Persons Act.

The Act was epoch-making, for by it the State assumed responsibility for the blind not only during school-life, but through adolescence into manhood and old age. Its three provisions were as follows:—

(1) Every blind person who has attained the age of 50 shall be entitled to receive and to continue to receive such pension as under the Old Age Pensions Acts, 1908 to 1919, he would be entitled to receive if he had attained the age of 70.

(2) It shall be the duty of the council of every county and every county borough to make arrangements to the satisfaction of the Minister of Health for promoting the welfare of blind persons ordinarily resident within their area.

(3) The War Charities Act, 1916, shall apply to charities for the blind as if it were herein re-enacted.

By the third of the above provisions, charities for the blind were protected from the fraudulent by registration, and by the first, the blind man or woman in later middle life was removed from the fear of destitution. But it was the second provision of the Act that opened up a new chapter in the welfare of the blind. Voluntary effort was not superseded by municipalisation, for the local authority ("the council of every county and every county borough") might depute a voluntary agency to do its work. In point of fact, a great many local authorities elected to do this, handing over the direct work of caring for the blind to those voluntary societies which, as Home Teaching Societies or as Associations for the Care of the Blind, had for many years past been grappling with the needs of the blind, often with very inadequate financial resources.

Though of late years there has been a tendency for the local authorities to elect to do the work themselves, there are still a considerable number of voluntary agencies responsible to the local authorities for registration and general welfare of the blind.

The schemes put forward by the local authorities in response to the edict that they should "make arrangements to the satisfaction of the Ministry of Health" naturally varied very widely, according to the enlightenment or otherwise of the authority, and also according to the financial resources of the locality. The Fifth Annual Report of the Advisory Committee (1923-4) stated that all the local authorities had submitted schemes, and the Report for 1926-7 that all the schemes were in operation, though in some cases the progress made was tentative and slow.

Figures given in the Reports of the Advisory Committee show the steady increase of grants made by the Ministry of Health for services for the blind, as specified in the table given on page 21. They rose steadily from a total of £69,886 in 1921-22 until in 1929-30 the sum of £131,368 had been reached. Owing to the changes made in payment of grant in later years, as a result of the Local Government Act of 1929, figures after 1929-30 are not obtainable.

Wireless for the Blind.

Before passing on to the Local Government Act of 1929, mention may be made of an Act of Parliament passed in 1926, which enabled blind persons to own wireless receiving sets without the payment of a licence.

At first sight, this may seem a comparatively unimportant piece of legislation, but it is one that is significant, in that it shows how large a place wireless had already come to hold in the lives of the blind. It is not perhaps too much to say that the discovery of wireless has been one of the greatest factors in the emancipation of blind men and women, and is worthy to hold a place not far below Braille.

The British Wireless for the Blind Fund, recognising this, has, as its objective, the provision of wireless sets for all necessitous blind persons in Great Britain and Northern Ireland.

Local Government Act, 1929.

In 1929 the Local Government Act was passed, which, although it was not an Act primarily concerned with the blind, had three important results on the system of blind welfare:—

(1) It transferred the administration of the Poor Law from the Boards of Guardians to the councils of counties and county boroughs, so that henceforth the same authorities became responsible for the Poor Law and for the blind.

(2) It empowered county and county borough councils to make “declarations” to the effect that domiciliary assistance should in future be given to blind persons under the Blind Persons Act instead of under the Poor Law.

(3) It introduced changes in the system of the payment of grants to voluntary associations. Instead of the grants payable by the Ministry of Health for the services detailed on page 21, local authorities received from the Exchequer block-grants. With this substitution of the block-grant for specific grants, the direct inspection of voluntary agencies by the Ministry of Health ceased. The inspectorate of the Ministry, somewhat reduced in numbers, still supervises the local authorities in their performance of obligations laid upon them by the Blind Persons Acts.

In 1933 the County Councils Association and the Association of Municipal Corporations, representing generally the interests of the local authorities, whose responsibilities for blind welfare had been enlarged by the Local Government Act, took steps to eliminate any redundant or overlapping organisations. Eventually the seven Counties Associations, referred to on page 19,

were reduced to four regional bodies, one for the Midland, Eastern and Southern Counties, one for the North, one for the Western Counties, and one for Wales. At the same time the National Institute for the Blind agreed to reconstitute its Council, so as to include representatives elected by the four regional bodies, the County Councils Association, the Association of Municipal Corporations and agencies for blind welfare generally.

Blind Persons Act, 1938.

The Blind Persons Act, 1938, reduced the age at which a blind person became eligible for old age pension from fifty to forty years, and also required local authorities in determining whether financial assistance should be given to a blind person to take into account not only his own needs, but those of his dependents. Further, the Act empowered local authorities to assist in the matter of the funeral expenses of the blind and their dependents.

Prevention of Blindness.

An attempt has been made in the preceding pages to give a brief outline of the development of the care of the blind in England and Wales during the past hundred and fifty years, but nothing has been said of a subject that is of at least equal importance. The care of the blind is essential, but the prevention of blindness a matter of no less urgency. It is, however, a subject that has, until comparatively recently, not received the consideration it deserves.

Statistics of blindness for the year 1937-38 show that of the total population of blind persons in England and Wales, more than 14 per cent. lost their sight in early infancy, and it is safe to conclude that in very many cases the cause of their blindness was infantile ophthalmia. "It is evident," states the Report of the Departmental Committee on the Causes and Prevention of Blindness in 1922, "that infantile

ophthalmia is a very serious factor in the causation of blindness, and constitutes a problem of vital national importance."

Blindness from infantile ophthalmia can almost always be prevented if immediate steps are taken to deal with the disease, and it is therefore not surprising that the Royal Commission of 1889 recommended that information relating to simple methods of prevention should be circulated broadcast, through the sanitary authorities or the Post Office. No official action was, however, taken as a result of the Commission's Report, and it was left to private enterprise to distribute leaflets on the matter. Gardner's Trust for the Blind was active in this undertaking, and distributed 42,000 leaflets in English in addition to several thousand in Yiddish.

In 1909 the pottery towns of Fenton, Longton, Newcastle-under-Lyme, Stoke-on-Trent, and Burslem approached the Local Government Board with the request that infantile ophthalmia might be made compulsorily notifiable within their boundaries, and the agreement of the Board was obtained. In the following year a similar application was made by the Chester City Council, and finally in 1914 an order of the Local Government Board made notification compulsory throughout England and Wales.

In 1920 the Departmental Committee referred to above was appointed to enquire into the Causes and Prevention of Blindness, and issued a valuable Report two years later, stressing the importance of prompt and adequate measures in dealing with infantile ophthalmia, and treating at some length of industrial eye diseases and accidents.

In 1925 the Public Health Act gave county councils and county borough councils power to make such arrangements as seemed to them desirable, with the approval of the Minister of Health, to assist in the prevention of blindness, and in the treatment of persons suffering from disease or injury to the eye.

It must be admitted that work in the interests of prevention of blindness has in the past been seriously hampered by lack of accurate information of the causes of blindness, and the failure of persons responsible for registration to require medical evidence of blindness. The work of registration has up to a recent date been extraordinarily unmethodical and haphazard.

In 1929 the Union of Counties Associations for the Blind set up a Standing Sub-Committee to enquire into the whole subject of prevention, and one of its first tasks was the preparation of a Report on Certification and Ascertainment of Causes of Blindness. The Report opened with a candid confession to the effect that the Committee, in attempting to explore the problem of prevention, was "faced with the lack of any scientific data of two essential kinds, first as to the prevalence of the actual defects of the eye determining blindness, and secondly, as to the various causes of these defects." A form of certificate was drawn up by the Committee and recommended, almost as it stands, for use by the Ministry of Health, which urged that in future certification should only be undertaken by medical men with special experience in ophthalmology.

On the dissolution of the Union of Counties Associations in 1938, the Ministry of Health set up a standing Advisory Committee on Blindness, including the prevention thereof, to carry on, so far as such a Committee can, the work of the Union's Prevention of Blindness Committee. In the same year the National Institute for the Blind appointed a Committee on the Prevention of Blindness, to work in close conjunction with the local authorities and other bodies actively concerned.

The eighteen years that have elapsed since the passing of the Blind Persons Act, 1920, have been marked by a very definite improvement in the condition of the blind. It should not be too much to hope that with interest and intelligence focussed on problems of

prevention, the next two decades may see an equal advance towards the abolition of preventible blindness.

Acts of Parliament and other Publications dealing with the Blind.

ACTS OF PARLIAMENT—

Old Age Pensions Acts, 1919, 1924.

Blind Persons Acts, 1920, 1938.

Education Act, 1921.

Wireless Telegraphy (Blind Persons Facilities) Act, 1926.

Local Government Act, 1929.

Blind Voters Act, 1933.

The above are all obtainable from His Majesty's Stationery Office, Adastral House, Kingsway, London, W.C.2.

OTHER PUBLICATIONS—

Handbook on the Welfare of the Blind in England and Wales (Third Edition) 1939. Price 1/-. Obtainable from H.M. Stationery Office.

League of Nations Report on the Welfare of the Blind in Various Countries, 1929. Price 10/6. Obtainable from Messrs. Constable, Orange Street, London, W.C.2.

Reports of the Advisory Committee on the Welfare of the Blind (from H.M. Stationery Office).

Proceedings of the World Conference on Work for the Blind, New York, 1931. Price £1 0s. 9d. Obtainable from the National Institute for the Blind, 224 Great Portland Street, London, W.1.

Chronological Survey of Work for the Blind (H. J. Wagg). Price 2/6. Obtainable from the National Institute for the Blind.

Education of the Blind: Report of the Joint Committee of the College of Teachers of the Blind and National Institute for the Blind. Obtainable from the National Institute for the Blind at a special price of 2/6 by workers engaged in the education of the blind.

OTHER N.I.B. BULLETINS.

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|-----|---|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|---------|
| 1. | Employment of the Blind (Employment of blind persons in ordinary factories and workshops, and Sub-Contracting as a means of finding new occupations) (out of print) | ... | ... | ... | ... | ... | ... | 3d. |
| 2. | Museums and the Blind (out of print) | ... | ... | | | | | 3d. |
| 3. | Gardening for the Blind | ... | ... | ... | ... | | | 3d. |
| 4. | A Handbook on the Deaf-Blind | ... | ... | ... | | | | 6d. |
| 5. | Basket-making by the Blind (out of print) | ... | | | | | | 6d. |
| 6. | The Care of the Blind Baby | ... | ... | ... | | | | 3d. |
| 7. | A History of Blind Welfare in England and Wales | | | | | | | 6d. |
| 8. | Report on Sighted Labour in Workshops for the Blind | ... | ... | ... | ... | ... | ... | 6d. |
| 9. | Blind University Graduates | ... | ... | ... | ... | | | 6d. |
| 10. | Massage as a Profession for the Blind | ... | ... | | | | | 6d. |
| 11. | Games for the Blind | ... | ... | ... | ... | ... | | 6d. |
| 12. | How the Newly Blind may be helped | ... | ... | | | | | 1d. |
| 13. | The Deaf-Blind : A Survey | ... | ... | ... | | | | 1s. 0d. |

